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By David Bedard

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## **Bolt the therapy dog breaks Alaska ice**

**JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska** — When Bolt, a honey-colored golden retriever, saunters into a 176th Wing office suite, he's greeted like a star quarterback or a local celebrity. Because wing Airmen vie for his attention during these periodic visits, they often stock their offices with chew toys and dog treats in an effort to give them an edge.

One such contestant for Bolt's affections is Alaska Air National Guard Staff Sgt. Amanda Plazio, noncommissioned officer in charge of Separations and Retirements, 176th Force Support Flight. When the gregarious canine enters Plazio's work area, he knows she will have a chew toy waiting for him.

The retriever noses around in the NCO's office until he finds his coveted prize. In return, the sergeant gets to enjoy some valuable face time with the helpful hound.

Bolt is a highly trained, nationally certified therapy dog who works closely with 176th Wing Director of Psychological Health, Diann Richardson, licensed clinical social worker.

"A therapy dog like Bolt, is a very well-trained dog that knows basic commands, is friendly, patient, confident, gentle, and comfortable in many different situations," Richardson said. "Additionally he provides comfort and love to others, can interact with a variety of people, is not aggressive, and listens."

She said Bolt arrived in Alaska fully trained with 20 critical voice commands and four hand signals. His training is comprehensive and is a crucial component of his value to the wing.

Professionals at Southeastern Guide Dogs in Palmetto, Florida, raised Bolt from a newborn pup to 10 weeks, giving him the socialization and training he needed before having him live and continue to train with a volunteer "puppy raiser" family for a year. He then continued his training as a guide dog for the vision impaired before trainers realized he was too social, a problem if he constantly wants to stop to ham it up with people and other dogs.

"Bolt is extremely social," Richardson said. "He likes people. He likes other animals. He likes children. He likes to be in the mix of things."

Disqualifying for vision-impaired work as his outgoing nature was, his canine charm was tailor-made for therapy work. Consequently, trainers worked with Bolt for 16 months before delivering him to Richardson.

Southeastern Guide Dogs sent a trainer to Alaska who worked with Richardson and her family for a week to ensure she had all the knowledge she needed to care for and effectively employ the well-schooled retriever in her workplace. The organization visits and reviews Bolt's effectiveness and training annually.

"Bolt is my coworker," she explained. "Bolt is an asset in my job as 70 percent of what I do is prevention, which means going into the squadron, getting to know people, and being a relatable and reliable entity."

Richardson said her acceptance into the units soared when people knew she is nearly always accompanied by the affable canine. Still, wing Airmen often skip past her and focus on the friendly dog.

"For every 10 'Hey Bolts,' I get about two 'Oh hi Dianns,'" she said. "Which is fine because his job is to add levity, decrease stress, and be a nice diversion from work."

Alaska Air National Guard Lt. Col. Matthew Harper, 210th Rescue Squadron commander, said he personally benefits from Bolt's visits, even if he has to occasionally play defense on his trash bin.

"He makes me happy ... when he's not rooting through my garbage," Harper said. "He takes your mind off whatever struggles you're dealing with."

Richardson explained the therapeutic effect Bolt has on Airmen from a clinical standpoint.

"What I know from science is dogs are natural stress reducers," she said. "They reduce cortisol in the body when you pet them, and they increase oxytocin levels, which is the feel-good hormone. Dogs can play a positive role in the psychological health of humans by reducing levels of depression, stress, anxiety, and loneliness."

She said beyond daily stress, most people will suffer at least three traumatic events during their lifetimes.

"We are all walking wounded," Richardson said.

To that end, she works to fight the tendency to resist help necessary to overcome adversity.

"Let's face it, there continues to be a stigma with mental health," Richardson said. "Even just walking around, some folks may be concerned I might impact their career in a negative way by just talking to me, which is not the case."

Bolt helps break down barriers so Richardson can have frank conversations with Airmen. If they need help, Richardson can refer them to several agencies on or off base.

"My role at the wing is to offer an external perspective for mental health challenges and, if needed, link service members or their family members to effective resources," she said.

Trained to help different people in different places, Richardson said Bolt enjoys the advantage of getting to know the Airmen he works with every day.

"What's nice about a military-facility therapy dog is that the people at the 176th Wing are his main mission," she said. "This is us. He's not going to schools or hospitals. He's working with Guard folks and their families."

“By now he is familiar with most work centers, recognizes a significant amount of people, walks around greeting folks at wing meetings, knows which service members give great scratches, and has comforted Airmen discussing difficult issues in my office,” Richardson continued.

And if he gets to gobble down a dog treat or chase a favorite toy, Bolt's visit with the Airmen he serves is all the better for it.

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#### **PHOTOS**

**DVIDS link:** <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/316089/bolt-therapy-dog-breaks-alaska-ice>



Alaska Air National Guard Col. Scott Coniglio, 176th Wing vice commander, greets therapy dog, Bolt, Dec. 20, 2018, at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. Bolt works closely with 176th Wing Director of Psychological Health, Diann Richardson, as part of the licensed clinical social worker's outreach to the wing. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by David Bedard/Released)



Diann Richardson, 176th Wing Director of Psychological Health, regularly works with therapy dog, Bolt, as part of the licensed clinical social worker's outreach to the wing. Following several months of socialization and training, the golden retriever became a nationally certified therapy dog. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by David Bedard/Released)



Alaska Air National Guard Staff Sgt. Amanda Plazio, 176th Force Support Flight, greets therapy dog, Bolt, Jan. 23, 2019, at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. Bolt works closely with 176th Wing Director of Psychological Health, Diann Richardson, as part of the licensed clinical social worker's outreach to the wing. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by David Bedard/Released)

